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ABSTRACT

Strong enrollments in career programs have led many to conclude that occupational training is, and should be, the premier function of a community college--a belief that is supported by the ways in which community colleges are funded. Though strong technical programs are an important part of what urban community colleges offer to their students, access to the baccalaureate degree remains the most important opportunity these institutions can provide. Colleges seeking to advance the transfer function have attempted to correct some of the mistakes that have been made in the interests of increasing enrollments and maintaining fiscal stability. Some of the most promising directions being taken in this area are: (1) colleges are beginning to reemphasize the importance of the transfer function; (2) they are beginning to require the same literacy skills and academic preparation for those who enter transfer programs as for those entering career programs; (3) they are re-establishing strong orientation programs for students who intend to transfer; (4) they are working with state coordinating boards, urban universities, and feeder high schools to establish clearly defined and better supported paths to the baccalaureate; (5) they are emphasizing skills that are required by advanced courses in remedial programs; and (6) they are concentrating available resources on students with the willingness and ability to use them to greatest advantage. (LAL)

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IMPROVING OPPORTUNITIES FOR EARNING THE BACCALAUREATE DEGREE FOR URBAN STUDENTS

Richard C. Richardson, Jr.

(Presented at a meeting of the Ford Foundation, Los Angeles, CA, Feb. 3-4, 1984)

There is an expression in sports about 'dancing with the one that brought you'; it means sticking with players and strategies that have worked. Our current concern about transfer education could easily benefit from a closer study of the virtues of that expression.

Providing opportunities for students to complete the first two years of a baccalaureate degree was the most important function in founding two-year colleges in all but a handful of states. The transfer function is, if you will, the one that brought us to the dance, so why have we neglected it for other more glamorous opportunities?

Twenty years ago, as Dean of Students at Meramec Community College in St. Louis, I looked out the window of our temporary campus one day and spied Joe Cosand, our district president striding purposefully toward the administration building. Before I had time to turn my chair around, he was in my office asking me if I would like to become the first dean of instruction at Forest Park. I did not play hard-to-get, so shortly thereafter, I found myself responsible for developing the instructional program for a large urban community college.

I soon decided that the transfer program was routine and needed little of my attention. Technical education was where the action was. And so, I became my own dean for technical education by delegating responsibilities for the transfer program to an associate dean. I knew, as do all of you, that the

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first two years of a baccalaureate degree can only be done less well than in the large traditional public university by conscious design and deliberate effort. I reasoned that left to their own instincts, community college faculty and their students would do at least as well as the university and this reasoning now stands buttressed by most of the available studies conducted over the past 25 years. In retrospect, benign neglect appears to have been the first big step, as they say in The Music Man, on the road to the depths of degradation.

I also remember the careful effort we devoted to developing the admission standards for our technical programs to ensure that students accepted into limited seat offerings like nursing and dental hygiene, were fully prepared to benefit from the courses required. Those who did not have the qualifications for technical programs could always enter the transfer courses, where the importance of what was being taught as well as its cost seemed not to justify the efforts to match student preparation and course requirements that we expended with some of our technical programs.

And so, we admitted all students to transfer courses regardless of whether their reading, writing, and math skills were equal to coping with the course requirements. Concurrently, we limited enrollment in high demand career programs to those who were well qualified. This "double standards" approach to open-door admissions left little doubt in faculty or student minds about which programs were more highly valued.

Then one morning, disaster; the St. Louis Globe Democrat announced to the world in bold headlines, **"Half of the Community Students Failing/Flunking Out."** The paper was reporting on an address given by a member of our faculty the previous afternoon. Unfortunately, his figures were only too accurate. During the remainder of that day, I had my opportunity to be a television personality,

but like Lincoln's story of the man who was tarred and feathered and ridden out-of-town on a rail -- if it had not been for the honor, I would just as soon have walked.

In the months that followed, with the assistance of a grant from the Danforth Foundation, we developed the special developmental program that Bill Moore wrote about in his book, Against the Odds. While this program was well intentioned and included a number of changes that were badly needed, we also incorporated a number of practices that have come back to haunt us. We gave up the notion of open admissions as the "right to fail" and replaced it with the right of the student to expect some program where they could succeed -- which we defined as staying in school. And they could succeed according to this definition regardless of previous preparation, motivation or effort.

We soon learned in St. Louis and in a host of other places, that deficiencies accumulated over 12 or more years of public schooling, were not to be overcome in a single semester or a single year. Only the mildly remedial -- and that number was no larger than 10-15 percent of those enrolling in developmental programs in most colleges -- were able to move into regular degree programs within the expected time. So we enlarged the purposes of our developmental programs to include self-actualization and followed that flash of genius with the declaration that anyone who enrolled in the program was successful, prima facie because as everyone knew, community colleges existed to do good and anyone who came in was better off for having been there. It was one of those claims that was equally difficult to prove or refute. But we were successful in keeping more students enrolled for longer periods of time and such enrollments became increasingly important to our fiscal stability as the growth years of the sixties and early seventies came to an end.

Because our transfer programs remained open to students who were unqualified to do the work they required, other policy changes became necessary, especially during the era of Vietnam veterans and the introduction of need-based financial aid. Students required financial assistance to remain enrolled and financial assistance was predicated on maintaining satisfactory progress. And so we eliminated penalty grades, adopted policies permitting withdrawal without penalty through the last day of the semester, and designed the "funny degree courses" where you could earn twelve hours of credit every semester for as long as you were eligible for financial aid without ever accumulating more than a grand total of 12 hours, and those could only be used toward some kind of general degree, which didn't mean anything except that you had somehow or other earned 64 hours without ever taking a coherent sequence.

Of course, during this period I left St. Louis and became president of a new community college in Pennsylvania, but while the settings changed, the practices remained relatively constant. Almost all community colleges, for a lot of very good and some not so good reasons, engaged in many of these same practices, and for the most part, were oblivious to their impact on the transfer program.

Several colleagues and I have reported on the cumulative impact of these practices in a new book from Jossey-Bass, Literacy in the Open Access College (Richardson et al, 1983). One thesis we drew from this three year NIE-funded study of a community college, was that an institution established to level-up the disadvantaged segments of the population to educational levels that would make them more competitive for higher status positions had, in fact, been quite successful at leveling-down the reading, writing, and numeracy skills required in the first two years of a baccalaureate sequence. Unfortunately, this accomplishment had come under attack for both the numbers and the performance

of transfers. The problem had also not gone unnoticed by the Ford Foundation, which is why we are all together at the L.A. Airport. Is all of this attention to something so routine and traditional, justified?

One of the curses of community college funding patterns is the tendency they encourage for equating importance with numbers. If more students enter career programs than transfer programs, then the career programs must be more important since they generate more revenues. It does no disservice to the importance of career training in community colleges to observe that the excessive emphasis we have placed on this function has downgraded the importance of transfer education in the minds of our faculty and students as well as among state policy makers who control our resources. The influential Brenneman and Nelson (1981) study came within a hairs breadth of recommending that community colleges relinquish the transfer function to four-year colleges and universities where, according to studies by Astin (1982) and others, the ratio of entering students to graduates is much higher even when such factors as previous performance and aptitude are carefully controlled. Important leaders within our ranks such as Ed Gleazer (1980), have argued persuasively for emphasizing community at the expense of college. In brief, during the past decade we have been swept almost irreversibly toward community renewal, lifelong learning, career education and, most recently, high tech. None of these directions, in my judgment, address the central rationale for establishing community colleges in urban areas. The slogan of our national association is "Opportunity With Excellence." But what is opportunity, and how can we measure excellence in the urban college?

Howard Bowen (1977) demonstrates that education does not increase the number of desirable jobs in the structure of occupations. At best, it provides for some rearrangement among those who occupy these positions. Russell

Rumberger (1984) writes in a recent issue of the Phi Delta Kappan about the growing imbalance between education and work. His figures show that the proportion of high level jobs in the economy has increased only about 4 percent during the last 20 years. In that same period, the percentage of baccalaureate degree holders employed in high level jobs has declined by more than 10 percent. While we are innundated with visions of the jobs that will open up as a result of the rapid development of computer technology, a closer examination of where the largest number of jobs will open, as distinct from misleading percentage figures about relative growth, reveals quite clearly that on the order of 5 to 1, new jobs will be in the service industries. An individual's ability to compete for most of these jobs is enhanced little, if any, by schooling beyond the 12th grade.

When these facts are combined with the high unemployment rates and declining industrial base of many urban areas, I have great difficulty in visualizing students deriving much opportunity from sitting in classrooms taking discrete courses that do not lead in any documented way either to jobs or to transfer. My apprehensions are in no way diminished by the knowledge that many of these students who leave before completing any degree or certificate, will be competing with baccalaureate graduates who are in oversupply for the same jobs for which community college non-completers have prepared. Adding to these concerns is the knowledge that many of these students would have preferred to enter more desirable programs such as nursing or computer science, but have been displaced by reverse transfers from four-year colleges and universities, as many as half of whom will have already earned a baccalaureate degree by the time they are accepted to a community college program.

Please don't misinterpret what I am saying. Strong technical programs are an important part of what urban community colleges offer to their students, and those who complete them often get jobs that are extremely desirable. But let's be realistic. Fewer than 15 percent of those enrolled in most community colleges ever complete any degree or certificate program. And the strong enrollments in career programs that have led many to conclude that occupational training is, and should be, the premier function of a community college, is often, at least in part, an artifact of the ways in which community colleges are funded. Legislators like the concept of training people for gainful employment, so they provide bonus funding in many states for courses and programs with the career designations.

Community colleges, in turn, try to obtain this designation for as many courses as possible in order to maximize revenues. The process is very understandable, and in many ways ingenious, but the results tend to overstate the numbers served by career education.

That is why I believe that access to the baccalaureate remains the most important opportunity an urban community college can provide. The importance of the opportunity is out of all proportion to the numbers who may actually be able to take advantage of it. The baccalaureate degree remains the "gate-keeper" for the professions. Those who possess it, have a competitive advantage over those who do not in obtaining a job, or even in competing for admission to an associate degree nursing program. The opportunity of using the community college as a springboard to the baccalaureate is so critical to those who live in urban areas, that its importance literally cannot be overstated. Obviously, you believe in improving this opportunity, as does Ford. The project that Lou Bender and I will conduct proceeds from a similar position of advocacy. We believe in the importance of the transfer function and we believe

that the weight of evidence will support a conclusion that this function is being performed by urban colleges with some level of effectiveness. At the same time, neither you nor we are blind to the fact that our efforts to encourage the progress of urban students toward the baccalaureate can be improved.

One of the most volatile issues in any effort to improve the transfer function involves the question of access versus achievement. In my view, this problem has been mis-stated. Most community colleges have been reluctant to establish priorities. Instead, we have taken the position that society has an obligation to provide as much funding as community colleges need to carry out the good work in which they engage. In support of this argument, we emphasize the returns to society that accrue from the education we provide. Unfortunately, our preference for rhetoric over research has left us vulnerable to studies completed by others. The information released by the California Postsecondary Commission at a critical juncture in the tuition debate, stating that the typical community college student was not a low-income, minority youth struggling to get an education while holding a job, but rather a relatively prosperous white woman returning to sharpen job skills or pursue personal interests, is only the most recent example of this problem. We need better information about our problems, as well as our triumphs.

Our refusal to establish priorities has emphasized access defined as the right to sit in some classroom at the expense of opportunity defined as a reasonable chance for completing a sequence of coursework that will make a significant difference in where a person fits within the occupational structure. Perhaps it is time to recognize, that in an environment of scarce resources, the only way we can provide opportunity with excellence is to establish priorities less dependent upon success measured by the numbers who

participate, and more related to success measured by the numbers whose lives are affected in a measurable way by their contact with us. Affecting the life chances of urban students will require reversing some of the decisions of the past quarter century to give greater emphasis to the baccalaureate function.

We are beginning to correct some of the mistakes that have been visited on community colleges during the past two decades in the interests of increasing enrollments and maintaining fiscal stability. Through efforts such as yours, the shape of needed change is becoming increasingly clear. Let me conclude these remarks by summarizing some of the directions that appear most promising.

1. We are beginning to reemphasize the importance of the transfer function. Evidence from a survey we completed for the State of Arizona suggests that the general public is well aware that many of our career programs furnish more transfers than some of our transfer programs. Their interest is focused squarely on the opportunity function, which implies some reasonable level of effectiveness in all of the associate degree programs we offer.

2. We are beginning to require the same literacy skills and academic preparation for those who enter baccalaureate sequences as we require from those entering career programs with similar academic demands.

3. We are re-establishing strong orientation programs for students who enter with the intent of earning a degree as distinct from those who are interested only in pursuing discrete courses for personal reasons. Our study of literacy found that student objectives were more important in meeting course objectives than academic ability.

4. We are working more closely with state coordinating boards, urban universities and feeder secondary schools to establish clearly defined and better supported paths to the baccalaureate.

5. We are encouraging our colleagues, who have responsibilities for remediation, to emphasize the skills that are required by advanced courses as opposed to accepting self-actualization, as an appropriate goal.

6. Our responsibility as community colleges, is to provide real opportunities to as many students as possible. Students, in turn, have the responsibility of putting the opportunity to good use. Required placement, standards for progress, competency based exit criteria and enforced withdrawal, are all strategies in use by community colleges to permit concentration of available resources on those who demonstrate the ability and willingness to use them to the fullest advantage.

Perhaps most important of all, we can learn to accept the high risks that are part of serving a high risk population. In the final analysis, it will not be exclusively a question of how many our urban colleges serve, but, in addition, how well. We do not need an enormous expansion in the absolute numbers of doctor, architects, lawyers, teachers or engineers available to our society. It is on the other hand, absolutely critical to the future of our society that a fair number of men and women prepared for these positions, come from urban areas where the largest concentrations of minority citizens may be found. Community colleges are ideally positioned to address this task, as long as they

understand that our society will not accept marginal preparation among those to whom we entrust our health, our bridges, our disputes, or the education of our children. What is clearly needed is opportunity with excellence.

The failure to provide both within urban community colleges will signal the need to find some alternative approach to ensuring that urban enclaves do not become potentially explosive dead-ends for large numbers of people. But alternatives require both time and resources, and we have very little of either. The Ford Foundation program that has brought us together today, represents a re-affirmation of faith in the ability of urban community colleges to offer baccalaureate opportunities with excellence. I'd give you 10 to 1 they're right. After all, it shouldn't be that difficult to dance with the one that brought us! And, we might even come to enjoy it.

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